

Creating a Selective Web Archive of Central and North Vancouver Island Community Information during COVID-19: VIU Special Call for Proposals related to COVID-19 [Abstract of Proposal]

Abstract

As the COVID-19 crisis unfolds, in what could be early days of widespread social and economic change, many are called or compelled to analyze, reflect, or create even as we react. We also cast forward reflexively, anticipating when we or others may consider this present as past, and discern its lessons for public health, for community dynamics, for supporting healthcare systems and workers, for redressing perilous inequities faced by marginalized populations, for ensuring resilient, sustainable social supports and economic systems.

When we look back to make sense of this time, what will be the available sources? What will have been curated about Vancouver Island communities? What will have been lost? In a recent call to the community of practice, the Canadian Web Archiving Coalition (CWAC) stated:

The deadly flu outbreak of 1918-19 is often called the 'forgotten pandemic.' Our responsibility now is to ensure the lessons of COVID-19 are not forgotten. Our collective efforts to capture and preserve the essential online elements of this unprecedented event are critical. (CARL-ABRC).

Since 2017, VIU Library has extended curation activity to non-traditional collections, engaging in selective web archiving to identify, assess, capture, and preserve web-based content of institutional or regional significance that may be ephemeral or vulnerable to loss, due to technological change or human factors.

The key outcome of this scholarly work will be curation of a more comprehensive and discoverable web archive related to COVID-19 impacts for Central and North Vancouver Island than will be possible through the existing capacity of VIU Library. The web archive may include content nominated by other VIU scholars and community members, reflecting and supporting their areas of scholarship and interest. Outputs will be made available for Open Access by future scholars and citizens.

Literature Review

The basis for near-term or future reflections about this peculiar, isolated, insular and yet unprecedentedly connected time could conceivably be sources of the hard copy, traditional kind. In seeming tribute to key sources of the past, such as Pepys' plague diaries, the Archives of Indiana University Library has issued an invitation for contributing diarists of COVID-19:

In the spirit of documenting this moment, the University Archives invites you to keep a diary of living during the COVID-19 epidemic in Indiana. Diarists may type or write by hand, draw, compose poems, gather stories and so forth. No stress needs to be placed on “good grammar”, spelling or style. The emphasis is on self-expression, candor and a willingness to be a social commentator.

However, considering the ways in which most of us communicate now, this project strikes me as niche, and quaint; an art exhibit in the making, beautiful and significant, but likely different in critical ways from the record of daily life that diaries, letters, and other analogue records once represented.

A week or two ago, I noted a blog post commenting on loss of access to information during the time of “research distancing.” The authors lamented that “beyond what we already had on hand, what we hurriedly pulled from the library before the lockdown, or what we’re able to buy on Amazon, all that we have to make sense of the past are the digital sources on the screens in front of us. Welcome to 2020.” They went on to reflect that “research is never strictly about accessing everything we need, but about accessing what we can, and stopping when time, resources, and the availability of sources tells us to.” (MacEachern & Turkel).

What these authors have to say about being logistically constrained by the availability of sources rings true, but it is also not accidental that they have what they have. Researchers are still working now, with what they pulled from the library, with digital sources on screen, in large part because of the critical work of curation done by librarians, archivists, and other workers in culture, research, and memory institutions. When we look back to make sense of this time, what will be the available sources? What will we have curated? What will have been lost?

Since 2017, VIU Library has extended curation activity to non-traditional collections, engaging in selective web archiving to identify, assess, capture, and preserve web-based content of institutional or regional significance that may be ephemeral or vulnerable to loss, due to technological change or human factors. This is an area of emerging scholarly work that I have been developing as other responsibilities allow, and within the capacity of the Library’s paid subscription for archiving tools. Within those limitations we have added several content-rich, locally-developed web resources to the [Library’s web archive collection](#). Among others, these include:

[Alexandro Malaspina Research Centre](#)
[BC Studies 2017: \(Un\)Settling British Columbia](#)
[Commemorating Ye’yumnuts](#)
[The Homeroom. British Columbia's History of Education Website](#)

I have also promoted, fostered, and contributed to the development of web archiving community of practice in the region and beyond, to share learning, expertise, and resources, and to coordinate activities of shared interest, including thematic collections. In 2017, this led to VIU

Library's participation in building the BC Wildfires web archive, maintained and hosted at UBC Library, with content for the collection gathered with the support of other web archiving libraries in BC. Subsequently, in coordination with UVic Library, VIU Library led the creation of a web archive collection related to the 2018 [Duncan-North Cowichan Referendum](#).

Maemura et al. discuss the necessity of situating web archives with respect to provenance, identifying a structured set of elements that if present “contribute to an understanding of both the individual decisions that shape a collection through the web archiving process and their situated nature within specific and evolving organizational and technical contexts” (2018). Through such critical approaches to curation, we may better understand our intentions, and also perceive gaps and opportunities with respect to representation. To date, mainly large, urban institutions have had the resources and expertise to attempt web archiving; yet it is critical that regions and communities find voice in this work. My own persistent promotion and participation in networked coordination of web archiving is grounded in the importance of effortful community representation.

This is work that many librarians are well-suited for, holding as principles of practice to seek out a broad representation of perspectives in relation to the scope and purpose of any curated collection; to be responsive to community needs; and to prioritize sustainable access and long term stewardship on behalf of users, taking into consideration best practice and guidance regarding applicable information rights (e.g. OCAP(R)). Reflecting on our collaborative web archiving efforts as of 2018, my colleagues from UVic Libraries and I concluded that “this new kind of collecting work will be increasingly critical to representing and reflecting the transforming and ephemeral nature of local public knowledge and discourse” (Rollins, Huculak, McFarland).

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